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## Teachers' Role Perception

### **Abstract**

The article focuses on teachers' role perception. The research was brought about by the assumption that teachers' awareness of their roles is a constituent of reflective professionalism. The first part of the article contains a short review of changes in the teacher's role. The second part presents research results. In order to find out if teachers are aware of their roles and how they perceive them, a questionnaire was implemented in a group of 124 teachers of primary school and middle school. Cumulative interpretation of gathered data suggests that teachers perceive their roles traditionally.

**Key words:** *teachers' roles, role perception, role understanding.*

### **Teachers' traditional and modern roles**

Teachers fulfil a complex set of roles, which vary from one society to another and from one educational level to another. The teacher has always been assigned roles connected with adapting young people to the environment. Up till now being a teacher has meant educating, teaching and taking care of pupils but the essence of action has undergone extensive changes. Educational aims, teaching methods and quality of teacher-student relationships also have been adjusted particularly in terms of autonomy a learner has over learning and in relation with teacher. Moreover, teachers' work was associated mainly with individual effort: leading classes behind the closed door of a classroom. The teacher was expected to control, instruct, guide, help and discipline. He/she had responsibility for, and authority over pupils. Nowadays it is replaced with cooperation of professionals who support students' personal growth and manage the learning process departing from the rigid 45-minute pattern.

Having skimmed Polish and international pedeutology writings we can find abundance of teachers' roles and functions. All of them are complex and demand thorough professional preparation: a therapist, creator, researcher, guide, counselor, intellectual, animator, ethicist, philosopher, European and patriot, facilitator, assessor, leader, manager, and many others (Gołębniak, 1998; Kwiatkowska, 2009, p; Dyrda, Przybylska, 2007, pp. 119–128). The attributed roles consolidate different expectations of scientists, society, educational dissidents and probably, only to some extent, students. Taking into consideration theoretical assumptions it seems that more roles are attributed to the teacher than one person would be able to cope with. But on the other hand, the above-mentioned roles can be reduced to three main ones: didactic, educational, caring. It would be difficult to allocate each role to one basic because they percolate one another. Some new roles turn out to be just functions, as teachers are expected to react to different needs and situations. Thus, from time to time they have to act as therapists, animators, counsellors. Some of the discussed roles are more stable, evident in teachers' actions such as those ensuing from the teaching profession ontology: creator, communicator, ethicist, intellectual (Kwiatkowska, 2008, pp. 47–57).

Academic preparation provides teaching candidates with an overview of education foundations: from theoretical to pedagogical. They explore psychological, philosophical, sociological and pedagogical aspects of education. Teachers-to-be are made accustomed with teacher action ontology and ensuing from it roles, functions and tasks. The curriculum assumes that students must get to know what is the substance of teaching roles and strengthen their competences: teachers should know what to do, how to do that and why it is essential. Finally, practice verifies their grounding: extends and deepens. Even though I am aware that there is a distinction between teaching and talking about teaching, **the awareness of roles and expectations is crucial to act well**. The assumption can be referred to Tomaszewski's statement (1970, p. 183) that awareness along with abilities to meet responsibilities and motivation to work underlie the effectiveness of action in any field. The awareness of roles contributes to teachers' reflective acting and without doubt is the constituent of competences and professionalism (Kwiatkowska, 1997, p. 148). One could suggest that it is possible to work effectively without knowing the name of actions, perhaps in a technical profession it is achievable but teaching is communicative and without awareness it could not be professional (effective and highly competent). As sources of role are dual: experience and professional preparation, one who has had extensive theoretical preparation (academic) will attribute teachers' roles, customized during studies different, from the one who

has had schooling experience. On the other hand, practising without knowledge (awareness what I am to do) would be hazardous, for sure not professional. Awareness would be the sign of professionalism and a reflective attitude to work. Awareness of the teacher's professional roles along with their interpretation are constituents of **teachers' identity** (Kwiatkowska, 2008, pp. 229–280). Simplifying, the teacher's identity would include how one acts in a given situation and how actions are assessed, negotiated and acted upon by others (Burke, Franzoi, 1988, pp. 244–245).

In a school setting, the roles assumed by the teacher are multiple and varied, often identifiable by the physical environment (classroom, playground). Teachers must interpret their actions and act accordingly, thus confirming and reinforcing their role identification and understanding.

## **Research methodology**

The main aim of the research was to verify whether teachers are aware of their roles, imposed by law acts and pedagogical assumptions, and further how they perceive them. The following questions directed the planned research: Are working teachers aware of their roles? Do they identify with them? What functions do they associate with main roles? Which of the roles are the most important for them and which the least? Does their experience modify the perception of the roles? Are teachers able to fulfil all of them?

The data for this study was collected from 124 teachers of primary schools and middle schools in different towns of Silesia. The seniority of the surveyed teachers was the following: 51 teachers: 1–5 years, 32 teachers: 6–15 years, 22 teachers: 16–25 years, 19 teachers: 25 and more. 20 of them were male, 104 – female. 80 teachers declared postgraduate studies or other forms of mastering teacher competences (courses, training).

## **Research results**

The introductory part of the questionnaire was to estimate if the teachers are aware of roles attributed to them by theory. When asked what teachers' roles are, without a given list, all the teachers pointed to educating and disseminating knowledge, the third most often indicated one (more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all the respondents) was caring. Apart

from these the teachers mentioned a list of tasks and obligations they are supposed to meet. Organizing and administrative work (n=60<sup>1</sup>), employee obligations (n=55), controlling pupils' work and progress (n=50) were mentioned by a significant part of the teachers. Approximately every third teacher suggested diagnosing children's needs, abilities or disabilities (n=32) along with helping in their personal growth (n=32). Less than a quarter of the respondents pointed to the role of a therapist (n=20), leader (n=15) and advisor (n=12). A few of the teachers paid attention to specific roles such as an informer (n=10), class and school decorator (n=8), parents consultant (n=4), mediator in class (n=3). Although it is highlighted as the most important constituent of teachers' roles, only 3 teachers pointed to the creator of the learning environment. The mentioned roles did not deplete those addressed to the teacher so most often postulated roles in pedagogical literature were listed and the respondents were asked to indicate all roles connected with the profession ( Table 1).

**Table 1.** Teachers' identification of roles.

Teachers' roles	indications	indications %	most important indications	most important indications %
educator	124	100.0%	70	56.5%
teacher	124	100.0%	90	72.6%
carer	100	80.6%	55	44.4%
leader	62	50.0%	13	10.5%
animator	61	49.2%	25	20.2%
advisor	59	47.6%	8	6.5%
therapist	55	44.4%	27	21.8%
ethicist	52	41.9%	11	8.9%
creator/researcher	50	40.3%	20	16.1%
culture promoter	50	40.3%	7	5.6%
companion	42	33.9%	24	19.4%
diplomat	35	28.2%	10	8.1%
master/ guide	23	18.5%	9	7.3%
friend	17	13.7%	3	2.4%
intellectual	11	8.9%	0	0.0%

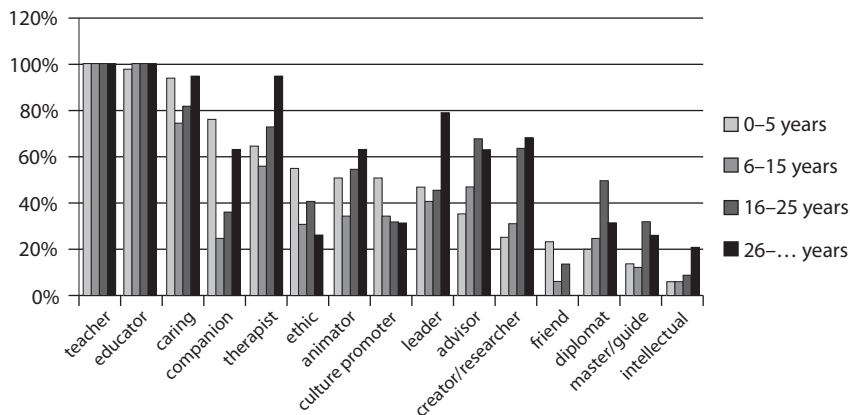
Source: own research.

<sup>1</sup> The numbers in brackets here and in the following parts of the article refer to the number of indications in the questionnaire.

The number of choices was not limited, on average each teacher mentioned about 5 roles ( $n = \text{exactly } 5, 3$ ). Tallying them down, one can notice that the surveyed group concentrated on the traditional dimensions of the teaching profession (teaching, educating, caring). Modern roles which are the reply to new individual and social needs were pointed at by a half and fewer participants of the survey (Table 1). In a knowledge society, an intellectual, creator, master/guide are claimed to be the core of a reflective practitioner. In the presented research fewer than a half of the surveyed teachers ( $n = 50$ ) thought that the teacher is a creator of learning environment. Even fewer identified the teacher as a master and a guide for students ( $n = 18\%$ ). Although the nature of teacher actions entails intellectual involvement, only 8.9% of the respondents noticed that role. Asked to indicate 3 most substantial roles of all, the teachers habitually chose the most common ones. Apart from that, about 1/5 of the respondents indicated a therapist, animator and companion as crucial roles. Few noticed the importance of being a friend, advisor, culture promoter, master and guide, no one thought that the teacher must be an intellectual. Two participants refused to choose the most important roles, stating that they depend on who they work with.

Scheme 1 represents roles indications according to work duration. The teachers' responses indicate that seniority impacts on their role perception. The longer they work, the more attention they pay to roles omitted or ignored by the younger teachers in the research. Such roles as: a therapist, animator, leader, advisor, creator, researcher, diplomat, master, guide, and intellectual are indicated more often by the teachers who have worked longer than 15 years. It is worth noticing that the awareness of the intellectual and social context of work is highest among the most senior teachers ( $n = 26$  years and more). These teachers more frequently identified themselves with an intellectual (4 times more than the teachers beginning their career), creator and researcher along with being a leader. What is also meaningful is that being a friend is not recognized as a teacher role. **These findings reinforce the assertion that teacher experience modifies role identity and professional awareness.**

Being a teacher directly implies educating, teaching and caring. This conviction is embedded in the traditional understanding of the role. Nowadays we assume that these roles are so complex that they may comprise other ones, but on the other hand, it seems that there are prior roles and subordinate ones. It can be supposed that the remaining 11 roles, referred to in the article, can be reduced to the "big three" conditioned teaching, educating and caring are understood broadly. Then again, the arbitrarily chosen names of the roles can be differently understood and distort the understanding of the profession. In order to dispel the doubts, in the

**Scheme 1.** Seniority and roles identification.

Source: own research

next part of the questionnaire the teachers were requested to explain how they understand the three roles and how they fulfil them. Data gathered in that part is interpreted qualitatively as the researcher is interested in the meaning of the roles. In Table 2 the traditional and modern understanding of teachers' roles are shown.

**Table 2.** Understanding of the roles.

Roles	Traditional	Modern
Educational	forming personality, social competences, values and identity, teacher as master	education as total experience, promoting personal growth which is prior to social strengthening intellectual and social potential, teacher as coach
Didactic	dispensing knowledge, one-answer teaching, teacher as a source of information	facilitators or managers of knowledge and creative thinking, teaching how to learn, teacher as tutor
Caring	creating safe environment, disciplining, controlling	not only maintaining well-being but meeting physical and psychological needs, managing student conduct

Source: own research.

When inquired: What do you do when educating / teaching/ taking care of your students? the teachers answered:

1. Educating means influencing personality (n=94), shaping character (n=80), inculcating values (n=80), socializing and familiarizing with social norms (n=55),

preparing for partnership (n=50), replacing parents, especially those inefficient (n=40), directing progress (n=30), diagnosing and stimulating individual potential (n=29) "showing what is good, what is wrong" (n=20), preparing for self-education (n=10), "educating students" (n=10). An educator must be a role model (n=45), parents' assistant (n=32), authority (n=25) and should provide the best conditions for individual development (n=24).

2. The didactic role is connected with dissemination of curriculum knowledge in the easiest way (n=87), enriching vocabulary (n=60), source of different information (n=88), sharing knowledge and experience (n=54), shaping views (n=50), familiarizing with reality (n=49), developing abilities useful in adulthood (n=48), arousing interests (n=35), encouraging to learn (n=35), stimulating critical thinking (n=12) and creativity (n=9), showing how to learn (n=12) and where to seek information (n=2).

3. Caring is creating a safe environment (n=120), natural role as parents entrust their children (n=78), keeping an eye on students (n=47), "disciplining especially during breaks" (n=55), looking after younger pupils especially (n=44), winning children's and parents' trust (n=43), taking care of pupils' physical and mental health (n=17), in case of any problems referring a child to a specialist (n=14).

Having skimmed the above information it can be noticed that the teachers perceived themselves in relatively conventional roles. They paid attention to their contribution to the personal and social growth of students, but pitifully they understood educating mainly as influencing, shaping, inculcating rather than providing experience. The teachers highlighting individual aspects of education were in minority. Just about a quarter of all the indications suggested that teachers should promote personal and social growth. More than a half (n=70 indications) of the teachers identified themselves with a role model and authority, the roles that should be gradually replaced with a coach, tutor, guide... For sure such an education is not a total experience.

The teachers were prone to categorize teaching as disseminating knowledge rather than creating possibilities to construct it. It is utterly visible in the most common interpretation. Only the least often indicated ones are those which explicitly treat teaching as an interactive and creative process, with the aim to develop intellectual independence. What is astonishing is that the same teachers asked about creative teaching techniques answered that they used them either every day (n=50) or a few times a week (n=74). It must be mentioned that almost all the statements were so general that once more it was difficult to state undoubtedly if, for instance, developing abilities useful in adulthood (n=48) can mean preparing for independent thinking or just conforming.



Finally, the interpretation of the caring role indicates that the teachers are prone to discipline and control. It is understandable as they are legally responsible for the children who are in their care. On the other hand, only 33 statements suggest that caring means diagnosing and meeting needs. They did not find themselves in the role of a manager of student behavior.

**Which roles do you undertake in you work?** The teachers enumerated all the roles from the list given in the previous questions. It revealed that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the teachers saw themselves mainly in the role of a teacher and educator. Taking care of children was the third most often chosen role ( $n=65.3\%$ ). Almost half of the participating teachers paid attention to administrative functions and employee obligations such as reporting to the headmaster, meeting his/her expectations. Many teachers declared that they often animated school and local community and undertook controlling functions. Apart from the listed roles the teachers emphasized that they “do much more”, e.g. control and keep order, inform children and parents, consult – give them advice even after work. Some thought they were moderators of class discussions as well as mediators and judges in conflict among pupils or pupils and teachers. Only 10 respondents declared that they undertook all the given responsibilities and many additional functions ensuing from the core roles.

The ensuing question is **why the respondents do not undertake some roles**. Almost half of the respondents ( $n=60$ ) declared that they were neither creators or researchers nor intellectuals in their schools. 20 teachers asserted that they had not enough competences and experience to conduct research and implement innovations at work. The other 30 maintained that in their work such roles were not needed, 10 – they had too many other responsibilities that they had no time to perform the discussed roles. Referring to being an intellectual, the teachers gave similar reasons: 19 – did not feel competent, 18 – stated that they were gaining experience and were not ready yet, 17 – did not have to be an intellectual, 13 – did not understand this role, which is shown in the following quotation: “maybe it has something to do with philosophy, or being very wise”. The role of a guide is strongly advocated by modern pedagogy as one of the crucial obligations because it facilitates student learning and provides academic, social, and emotional support. But the respondents indicated that they did not have competences or authority to be a guide for their pupils ( $n=24$ ) and they were expected to be teachers not guides ( $n=9$ ). A comparable number of teachers did not work as therapists because they had competent school pedagogues or psychologists. The explanation concerning the remaining roles also concerns lack of competences or role uselessness. Adding up all the indications, 81 teachers found some roles difficult because they did not feel competent enough, 36 – because they were not prepared. Moreover, 50 teachers

indicated that some of the roles were useless, 21 – did not understand the roles and 20 – thought they had so many obligations connected with teaching, educating and disciplining students that they had no time to perform other, “additional” roles. Among all the surveyed teachers, 12 declared that they had got broad competences and if necessary they could fulfil all the roles and meet various expectations.

## **Summary and discussion**

Teachers' new roles are anchored in science and civilisation changes and are promoted to boost the effectiveness of education. Teachers in the knowledge society must be promoters of children's personal growth, ambassadors to multicultural communities and promulgators of democracy. The development of teacher identity, the negotiation and establishment of roles in a given setting, and the change in perception of self and others are inextricably intertwined.

The surveyed teachers rather neglect new roles. On the one hand, all the listed roles are, in the respondents' opinion, connected with the profession. Teaching (100%), educating (100%), caring (80.6%) and leading (50%) are most often designated. No other role was indicated as important by even a quarter of the respondents. Almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the teachers perceived teaching as the most important role whereas none of them perceived the role of an intellectual in the same way. Furthermore, creativity was not regarded as important. The assumption appears that they pay more attention to the organizational, administrative part of their work than to the core: intellectual, creative and communicative dimensions. Taking into account the roles the teachers declared to fulfil, it can be discerned that they undertake roles personally perceived as important. On the other hand, the surveyed teachers provided more varying perspectives about the role and expected actions of the teacher based on job experience. The more experienced teachers more often indicated such roles as a therapist, creator, leader, advisor, animator, and intellectual.

The cumulative examination of data indicated that the understanding of a role in the work context is very general and superficial. Whereas the teachers were able to identify the actions defining the three main roles, the interpretations were mainly “old-fashioned”. Adopting a simplified assumption that what you think about your duties conditions what you do, the surveyed teachers are likely to work in an “oldfashioned” way.

The results are to some extent astonishing: pedagogical researchers' and school law-makers' expectations towards teachers are higher than teachers'. Is it ignorance, practical thinking of teaching or maybe burn-out? The gathered data, for the time

being, do not allow resolving the problem but these questions must be taken into consideration in further studies. The rather superficial and simplified interpretation of the roles, low awareness of them may be attributed either to teachers' poor professional preparation or expectations towards teachers are exaggerated. Firstly, educational practice verifies the theoretical assumption about being a teacher and it is possible that multiplication of roles, splitting fundamental roles into functions do not act in favour of teacher professionalism. Perhaps roles "invented" by theoreticians do not correspond to the demands of school reality: teachers are obliged to concentrate on curricula, assess pupils' achievements, fill in documents, school registers, do administrative work, discipline pupils, etc. Secondly, multiplicity of the roles requires advanced, high-standard competences and teachers are not prepared to meet the standards: during studies, even postgraduate, they rarely explore the ontology of the teaching profession in theory and practice. Simplifying in order to be an intellectual, creator or researcher teachers must be aware of and convinced that teaching, educating and caring must be consistent with teachers' action ontology. In such a context, the implication of the presented research is quite pessimistic.

The research was planned as pilot research for wider range investigation concerning role beliefs and professional identification. The importance of these categories is likely to grow if we take into consideration that they impact on the effectiveness of school education. A good education can be only provided by competent teachers, reflective and creative. Consecutively, a problem with teacher professional education emerges. It is, therefore, crucial to provide high standard selection to the profession, studying based on researching, problem solving, verifying theory in practice and vice versa. Besides, engaging students (teacher-to-be) in experience early in the teacher education program, which makes them assume and discuss teachers' roles, could contribute to their role awareness and high-standard professionalism.

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